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ABSTRACT

Noting that confrontation is a fundamental element of debate, a study examined the confrontational nature of a 1980 presidential debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan by analyzing its verbal and visual context as presented through television. By means of videotapes, still photographs, and a typed transcript, each instance of a verbal attack or refutation was identified as a confrontational segment and categorized according to the issue being addressed. Selected verbal characteristics within each segment, such as loaded language and direct references to the opponent, were also noted. To arrive at an integrated analysis of the verbal and visual content, the following visual factors were also noted: type of shot, nonverbal characteristics, sequencing of visual images, vector orientation, and vector target. The results indicated that 53 attacks and refutations occurred during the debate. Reagan initiated 16 attacks and offered 15 refutational statements, while Carter initiated 21 attacks and made only one refutational statement. The issues of inflation, the Salt II Treaty, and the Social Security System generated more confrontational statements than did the remaining five topics of debate. While the degree and intensity of confrontation was minor, it is clear that Reagan was much more aggressive than Carter in trying to engage his opponent in direct confrontation. (HTH)

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AN INTEGRATIVE VERBAL AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE CARTER-REAGAN DEBATE

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INTRODUCTION

Communication scholars have devoted considerable effort to the study of a periodic event which has come to be known as the presidential debates. Numerous articles and papers have addressed the question of whether these events are, or should ever be called, debates. The question was posed by J. Jeffrey Auer[1] in referring to the Nixon-Kennedy appearances in 1960 as "counterfeit debates," a phrase adopted by Bitzer and Rueter in their comprehensive analysis of the 1976 debates between Carter and Ford.[2]

Others have characterized presidential debates as "televised joint appearances"[3] and "joint press interviews."[4] Those who boldly refer to these historic events as debates usually do so apologetically or enclose the word in quotation marks.

At the risk of annoying traditional rhetorical scholars, we have examined the content of Carter and Reagan's joint television appearance in 1980 as a debate.

In addition, we have specifically analyzed the content according to a commonly held traditional element of debate -- confrontation.

Our analysis is non-traditional in the sense that it goes beyond an examination of the verbal statements of the candidates. We have looked at confrontation between Carter and Reagan within the total context of the event, as it appeared on the television screen.

The propriety of this approach is suggested by Bitzer and Rueter in their analysis of the 1976 debates:

> Criteria based on principles of genuine debate will take us only so far . . . . Such criteria alone are not fully appropriate to analysis and assessment of the actual debates. The

> reason is that Ford and Carter debated in a defective, pseudo-debate format which practically ruled out genuine debate. Thus we must understand what sort of "debate" they engaged in and, given that understanding, apply additional, more realistic criteria.[5]

To examine modern-day presidential debates in the same manner that one would analyze the Lincoln-Douglas debates is inappropriate. Additionally, to compare the debates of 1858 and 1980 is of little utility. The differences between these events in time are more significant than their similarities.

Certainly, the format of the debate between Carter and Reagan governed the content of the candidates' arguments and the degree to which they engaged each other in confrontation. More importantly, the fact that the majority of the debate's audience viewed the event on television, compels us to examine the visual context in which the confrontation was presented. Berquist and Golden have stated:

> The presidential debates were electronic media events in which a speaker's delivery, appearance, and overall manner--as filtered through the television screen--proved to be more important than substance. The significance of this claim can be seen when we compare the impact of reasoning and evidence with delivery and appearance.[6]

This study examined the confrontational nature of the 1980 debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan by analyzing the verbal and visual context presented via the television medium. Confrontation is a fundamental element of debate, and is traditionally identified by those instances in which a candidate's position is verbally attacked or refuted by his opponent. By introducing the television medium, an additional factor, the contrast of visual

images presented, becomes equally important in studying the confrontational nature of the event.

METHOD

Analysis of the debate content employed the use of videotape recordings, still photographs of each camera shot, and a typed transcript. Each segment in which a verbal attack or refutation occurred was identified as a confrontational segment and categorized according to the issue being addressed (i.e., inflation, urban problems). In addition, selected verbal characteristics within each segment, such as loaded language and direct references to the other person, were noted.

To arrive at an integrated analysis of the verbal and visual content, segments in which a verbal confrontation took place were examined by looking at the accompanying visual context. Specifically, the following visual factors were noted:

1. Type of shot was classified as (a) a close-up of the person initiating the attack or refutation, (b) a two-shot showing both candidates, (c) a reaction shot in which the candidate being attacked was shown close-up.
2. Non-verbal characteristics such as eye gaze, gestures, or movement of the head.
3. Sequencing of visual images, particularly instances in which a reaction shot or two-shot coincided with a confrontational segment.
4. The vector orientation of each candidate when he was shown on the screen, e.g., the direction in which the candidate appeared to be facing.

5. The vector target of each candidate, e.g., the apparent object of the candidate's eye gaze or gesture (panel, audience, camera, or other candidate).

The following specific questions guided the analysis of verbal and visual content:

1. What issues served as the basis for confrontation?
2. To what extent did Carter and Reagan direct attacks or refutations to confront the opposing candidate?
3. How frequently, and in what manner, did each candidate make personal references to his opponent?
4. To what extent did each candidate engage in confrontation by looking at his opponent or gesturing toward him?
5. To what extent did the television medium visually portray confrontation through the type of shots selected and the sequencing of those shots?
6. To what extent were verbal and visual instances of confrontation integrated and synchronized?

RESULTS

Throughout the entire debate, 53 attacks and refutations occurred. Reagan initiated 16 attacks and offered 15 refutational statements. Carter initiated 21 attacks and made only one refutational statement. The issues on which these confrontations were based are identified in Table 1, along with the relative positioning of attacks and refutations made by each candidate.

Reagan generally attacked Carter's four-year record as president. His attacks were directed specifically to the following issues: inflation, government spending, urban development, the handling of the Iranian hostage crisis,

and the handling of the Salt II Treaty negotiations.

In his attacks of Reagan, Carter focused on envisioning what it would be like if his Republican adversary were elected President. Specifically, his attacks were directed at the following subjects: use of military force, tax policy, the minimum wage, domestic programs (in particular, for minorities), nuclear arms control, energy policy (including safety laws), the social security system, and the equal rights amendment. On occasion Carter pointed to discrepancies between Reagan's positions and those of the Republican party.

While the debate was structured according to eight topic areas determined by the questions from the panel, three issues seemed to generate more confrontational statements than the others: (1) inflation, (2) the Salt II Treaty, and (3) the Social Security System. In discussing the Social Security System, Carter attacked his opponent five times. Reagan refrained from attacking his opponent on this issue but made three refutational statements. Confrontations which centered on the issues of inflation and the Salt II Treaty were more balanced in terms of attacks and refutations offered by the candidates.

Both attacks and refutations made by the two candidates contained considerable use of support and evidence, factual illustration, and historical reference. Emotional appeals were used by Carter about twice as often as Reagan, and were characterized by the use of emotionally laden adjectives in describing Reagan or his positions (i.e., "dangerous," "belligerent," "misleading," "disturbing," and "careless").

Both candidates made reference to their opponent's record as Governor of their respective states. Carter, for example, attacked Reagan's record of government spending in California by stating:

> ...he had the three largest tax increases in the history of that state under his administration. He more than doubled state spending while he was Governor--122 percent

> increase--and had between a 20 and 30 percent increase in the number of employees in California.

Reagan immediately offered a refutation and took the opportunity to attack Carter's record as Governor of Georgia:

> The figures that the President has just used about California is a distortion of the situation there; because while I was Governor of California, our spending in California increased less per capita than the spending in Georgia while Mr. Carter was Governor of Georgia in the same four years. The size of government increased only one-sixth in California of what it increased in proportion to population in Georgia.

Reagan made 15 refutational statements throughout the debate. Of these, 14 were in response to attacks initiated by Carter. Reagan offered one refutational statement which had no direct reference to statements previously made by Carter during the debate:[7]

> I have not blocked the Salt II Treaty as Mr. Carter and Mr. Mondale suggest that I have.

Carter made only one refutational statement throughout the entire debate, that being in answer to Reagan's charge that the Democratic Senate had blocked the Salt II Treaty. Carter offered this refutation:

> The Senate has not voted yet on the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. There have been preliminary skirmishings in the committees of the Senate. But the treaty has never come to the floor of the Senate for either a debate or a vote.

Despite the fact that eleven of 16 attacks made by Reagan were directed at Carter's record as president, the incumbent made no refutations of these attacks.

Confrontational segments throughout the debate were characterized by direct references each candidate made to his opponent. Carter consistently referred to his opponent in the third person as "Governor Reagan." Including the use of pronouns (he, his, him), Carter referred to his challenger 63 times. He used the title "Governor Reagan" 30 times and in one instance referred to Reagan as "a man who hopes to be President."

In contrast, Reagan used references such as "Mr. Carter" (12), "President Carter" (4), and "This Administration" (1). Including the use of pronouns (he, him, his), Reagan made 50 references to Carter. More significantly, however, Reagan directly addressed Carter as "Mr. President" three times and used personal pronouns (you, your) three times. Those instances seemed to characterize the more intense periods of the debate, as will be noted in a later section of this paper.

The visual context in which confrontations took place throughout the debate had the potential of heightening the intensity and drama of the moment. If both candidates were engaged in confrontation, one would expect to see them looking at one another. This would be influenced, of course, by the choice of camera shots. Throughout the entire debate, Reagan and Carter were shown looking at each other only three times. In each of these occurrences Reagan was addressing Carter directly. Reagan was much more inclined to look directly at Carter when making a statement to or about his opponent. While Reagan was speaking, he looked at Carter 31 times throughout the debate. Carter, on the other hand, looked at Reagan only twice when talking about his opponent.

The sequencing of visual images did not enhance any notion that two political candidates were engaged in a debate. For the most part, changes in camera viewpoint went back and forth from one candidate to the panel. The few exceptions were some reaction shots of the other candidate in which the camera zoomed out to a two-shot. On only one occasion did the camera show juxtaposed

close-ups suggesting that the candidates had the opportunity to engage in true debate.

The lack of visual engagement between the two candidates was further emphasized by the fact that they addressed their statements to members of the panel. In consequence, both Carter and Reagan looked toward the left side of the screen in answering questions from the first two panelists. In answering questions from the other panelists, both candidates were shown looking screen right. The overall impact of this visual pattern was simply that during the close-up shots, there was no sense of visual interaction between the two candidates, unless one specifically turned away from the panel and toward his opponent. For the most part, both candidates looked at the panel throughout the debate.

Since most camera shots of the candidates were close-ups (32 for Reagan, 32 for Carter), the viewing audience had little opportunity to observe gestures made with the hands. There were four instances, however, in which Reagan was shown gesturing toward Carter; and seven times Reagan effectively used a slight toss of his tead to gesture toward Carter. In only one instance did Carter gesture toward Reagan, that being a subtle movement of the wrist and thumb to indicate a reference to his opponent.

Reagan made more attempts than did Carter to engage in confrontation. He took the initiative in responding to the first question pertaining to the differences between the two candidates on the uses of American military power.

Reagan responded to the question with, "I don't know what the differences might be, because I don't know what Mr. Carter's policies are."

At this point, Reagan looked directly at Carter, then continued by stating his position regarding military force. He ended his response by broadly attacking Carter's foreign policy, at which point the camera cut to a two-shot showing Carter in the background.

Carter answered the same question by comparing his record on defense spending with the Nixon-Ford administration. He made no direct attack on Reagan's statement of policy or position. During the first question-answer period of the debate, Reagan attacked Carter's foreign policy, Carter's economic policy, and, during his rebuttal, challenged Carter's statement on defense spending and military buildup. Reagan leveled four attacks against Carter, as contrasted by only one attack from Carter in the first opening minutes. Reagan attacked Carter at the very first opportunity, whereas Carter did not attack his opponent until 12 minutes into the debate, despite ample opportunities to do so. Confrontations which occurred during the first segment of the debate were of little significance in terms of the issues or the specific evidence presented. They were significant, however, in terms of the number of direct references which Reagan made to Carter and the comparison of direct attacks that each candidate made toward each other. Confrontations throughout the debate varied considerably in intensity. Two segments are particularly noteworthy.

The first of these occurred with Carter accusing Reagan of taking a position on the Salt II Treaty which "is extremely dangerous and belligerant in its tone." As the visual changed to a two-shot showing both candidates, Reagan began his rebuttal:

> I know the President is supposed to be replying to me, but sometimes I have a hard time connecting what he is saying with what I have said or what my positions are.

The visual then changed to a close-up of Reagan, showing him looking intensely at Carter. Reagan continued:

> My point I have made already, Mr. President, does not call for nuclear superiority on the part of the United States. It calls for a mutual reduction of whose weapons.

Reagan became more intense in his delivery at this point, looking directly at Carter. The visual then changed to a shot of Carter and the camera zoomed out to a two-shot showing both candidates. In one of the few instances in which the candidates were shown looking at each other, Reagan continued with:

> ... and to suggest that the Salt II Treaty that your negotiators negotiated was just a continuation, and based on all of the preceding efforts by two previous presidents, is just not true.

The attack by Reagan on Carter was both verbally and visually intense; and when given the opportunity to have the last word, Carter used his now well-known reference to his discussion with his daughter Amy on nuclear weaponry to end the confrontation.

A second confrontational segment which seemed more intense than the others occurred after Carter accused Reagan of advocating making Social Security a voluntary system. In his rebuttal Reagan addressed his opponent directly:

> Mr. President, the voluntary thing I suggested many years ago was that a young man, orphaned and raised by an aunt who died, his aunt was ineligible for Social Security because she was not his mother. And I suggested that if this is an insurance program, certainly the person who's paying in should be able to have his own beneficiaries, and that's the closest I've ever come to anything voluntary with Social Security.

During this exchange Reagan is first seen in a close-up. As he turned toward Carter and addressed him directly, the camera cut to a reaction shot of Carter, then zoomed back to a two-shot showing both candidates. As Reagan turned toward Carter a second time and looked at him directly, Carter's eye

gaze fell to the floor avoiding direct contact with Reagan.

Another confrontational segment in which Reagan addressed Carter directly was much less intense, but perhaps more noteworthy than other instances in which this occurred. It is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is the only place during the debate in which a closeup of both candidates was juxtaposed. A closeup of Carter giving his statement, directly followed by a closeup of Reagan at which point he begins his rebuttal. Second noteworthy in how Reagan "could dramatically differentiate himself from Carter . . . without projecting him(self) as unduly strident or defensive."[8]

The instance occurred with Carter claiming that Reagan was opposed to Medicare. As the camera cut directly from a closeup of Carter to a closeup of Reagan, he began his rebuttal with "There you go again."

Martel regards this seemingly minor exchange as a "master stroke" and notes that the line was "crafted by Reagan himself and practiced...two days earlier."[9]

A visual and verbal analysis of the 1980 Presidential debate leads us to conclude that the degree and intensity of confrontation was unquestionably minor; but it did occur. To the extent it was evident, it is clear that Reagan was much more aggressive than Carter in trying to engage his opponent in direct confrontation.

There is no question that lack of confrontation in the debate is attributable in part to the format, although as Hellweg and Phillips[10] have pointed out, the Cleveland format allowed greater opportunity for rebuttal than other formats that have been tried. Even so, the Carter-Reagan debate was highly structured, giving no opportunity for more direct confrontation. The restrictive nature of the format was clearly illustrated when Reagan addressed a question to Carter:

> I would like to ask the President why is it inflationary to let the people keep more of their money and spend it the way they'd like, and it isn't inflationary to let him take that money and spend it the way he wants?

At this point, the moderator, Howard K. Smith, interrupted with:

> I wish that question need not be rhetorical, but it must be, because we've run out of time on that. Now the third question . . . .

Television coverage of the event contributed very little to showing confrontation between two political candidates. The staging of the event, along with the selectivity with which images were shown on the screen, made for extremely sterile, if not dull, coverage of the most significant event of the campaign.[11]

Within the limitations of what candidates are willing to accept, future opportunities to televise presidential debates should explore more creative ways to present them to the voting public.

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3. Austin Ranney (ed.), The Past and Future of Presidential Debates (Washington: American Enterprise for Public Polic. Research, 1979).
4. Richard Salant, "The Good but not Great Non-Debates: Some Random Personal Notes," The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976. Ed. Sidney Krauss (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), 175.
5. Bitzer and Rueter, op. cit., p. 12.
6. Goodwin F. Berquist and James L. Golden, "Media Rhetoric, Criticism and the Public Perception of the 1980 Presidential Debates," QJS, 67 (1981), 132.
7. At a later point in the debate Carter attacks Reagan's position on the Salt II Treaty, suggesting "he wants to throw (it) into the wastebasket."
8. Myles Martel, "Debate Preparations in the Reagan Camp: An Insider's View," Speaker and Gavel, 18 (1981), 44.
9. Ibid.
10. Susan A. Hellweg and Steven L. Phillips, "Form and Substance: A Comparative Analysis of Five Formats used in the 1980 Presidential Debates," Speaker and Gavel, 18 (1981), 67-76.
11. The sterility of the televised staging was in some respects almost premeditated. In a telephone interview with NBC Pool Director Frank Slingland, on July 28, we were told: "I was not so much guided by the fact that they (the candidates) were addressing each other, but by an equality of shots to

try and keep them equal. Again, it would be like covering a law suit, being a court reporter and making sure you get every word exactly right, so that when it comes time to go back and look at the transcripts that you know you've got it accurate to everybody's satisfaction."

TABLE 1

CARTER-REAGAN DEBATE

Verbal Elements of Confrontational Sequences

Debate Topic	Reagan Attacks	Reagan Refutations	Carter Attacks	Carter Refutations
War and Peace	#1 use of military force (Carter record	#3 defense spending (historical)	#5 use of military force	
	#2 economy policy (tax plan)			
	#4 defense spending (Carter record)			
Inflation	#8 new jobs/unemployment (Carter record)	#7 inflation rate (historical) (Carter record)	#6 Reagan tax plan (Kemp-Roth Bill)	
	#9 unemployment/inflation (Carter record)	#14 government spending (Reagan record in CA)	#11 Reagan tax plan	
	#10 economic policy		#12 minimum wage	
	#15 government spending (Carter record in GA)		#13 tax policy (Reagan record in CA)	
	#16 government spending (Carter record in GA)			
	#17 economic policy			
Urban Problems	#18 urban redevelopment program (Carter record)	#21 minimum wage	#19 perception of racial problems	
	#20 government programs (Reagan record in CA)		#22 domestic social programs	
Terrorism Response Policy	#24 handling of Iranian hostage crisis (Carter record)	#26 nuclear proliferation	#23 nuclear proliferation	
	#25 embassy takeover in Iran (Carter record)			
Arms Control	#27 handling of Salt II Treaty negotiations (Carter record)	#28 Salt II Treaty position	#29 Arms control treaty positions	#30 Senate action on Salt II Treaty
	#32 general	#33 Salt II Treaty position	#31 Salt II Treaty position	
		#34 Salt II Treaty position		

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Table 1 - continued

Debate Topic	Reagan Attacks	Reagan Refutations	Carter Attacks	Carter Refutations
Energy Policy		#37 energy policy	#35 coal production figures/ government regulations (Carter record)	
		#38 safety laws (Reagan record in CA)	#36 energy policy	
		#39 government regulations	#40 safety laws (Reagan record in CA)	
Social Security Policy		#42 actuarial imbalance of social security system	#41 social security policy-- voluntary plan	
		#43 social security policy-- voluntary plan	#44 medicate position	
		#46 medicare position	#45 national health care position	
			#47 unemployment compensation	
			#48 quoting Democrats	
Opponent Weaknesses	#51 Misery Index (inlation/unemployment) (Carter record)	#52 quoting Democrats	#49 position agreement with political party	
			#50 use of military force	
			#53 position agreement with Republican party on ERA	
TOTALS	16	15	21	1

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